

## Scientific Advisory Panel COVID-19 (SciAP)

Update on COVID-19 variants 22 August 2023

<i>Commissioned by</i>	On the initiative of the SciAP
<i>Contact</i>	<a href="mailto:kommunikation@ethrat.ch">kommunikation@ethrat.ch</a>
<i>Website</i>	<a href="https://science-panel-covid19.ch/">https://science-panel-covid19.ch/</a>

## Update on COVID-19 variants

The Scientific Advisory Panel COVID-19 is in close discussions with the institutions providing the mandate (government and cantons) regarding the new SARS-CoV-2 variants. None of the variants currently being monitored in Switzerland (incl. EG.5, also referred to as ERIS) appears to have the potential to trigger a major variant wave. However, it is to be expected that after an extended period of low case numbers, we will see case numbers increase again.

At the end of last week, the BA.2.86 variant was detected for the first time in Denmark (three cases), as well as in the UK, Israel and the USA (one case each). This variant is a subvariant of Omicron BA.2 and has around 30 mutations in the spike protein compared to BA.2 and XBB, which is dominant in Switzerland. This kind of evolutionary shift has not been observed since the first emergence of Omicron. We estimate that BA.2.86 has been spreading for around two months. So far, this variant has not been observed in Switzerland, but is likely now widespread internationally.

# COVID-19

At present, the WHO classifies this variant as a “variant under monitoring”. Our knowledge of the three critical characteristics of this variant is as follows:

- Transmission: Since this variant has been detected several times around the world independently of each other, we assume that it will spread quickly. It is still unclear whether this variant has the potential to trigger a larger wave.
- Immune evasion: Several mutations indicate some immune evasion in relation to infection. Laboratory studies and epidemiological data will provide more precise information on how pronounced this evasion is. Protection against severe disease was not significantly reduced in any of the previous variants, and we assume that protection will remain for BA.2.86.
- Severity of the disease: Among the six cases detected, one elderly patient (> 80 years old) was hospitalised and, as far as we know, the other patients have experienced mild courses. Globally, we have not seen any clusters of severe cases so far. This means that there is currently no evidence of increased severity of the disease.

Genome sequencing of clinical samples and wastewater, which continues to be carried out at reduced levels, as well as the analysis of “S-gene dropouts” in Thermo Fisher TaqPath COVID-19 PCR tests ([link](#)) can help determine the spread of BA.2.86 in Switzerland.